

Fire Alarm Systems: A Life-Cycle Cost Perspective

All too often, the job of deciding which fire alarm system to purchase for a facility is delegated to an electrical contractor. While that's not automatically a bad approach, it may not be the best one, either. Often, the electrical contractor is more concerned with quickly getting a building opened or a renovation project completed, rather than finding a system that is the most user-friendly, works effectively, and provides value to the building owner over the long term, industry experts say.

To avoid this, the building owner or facility manager must be an active participant in the purchasing decision. While the initial cost of a fire alarm system may be significant, lack of involvement in the purchasing decision can prove to be much more costly when it comes to maintaining or upgrading the system.

Research

As a first step, the facility manager should research fire alarm manufacturers and their portfolio of products and solutions online. He or she also should consult with facility managers and electrical contractors in the local area to find out which manufacturers and distributors they prefer based on system capabilities, dependability and long-range cost savings.

Then, the facility manager should ask at least three fire alarm systems vendors to demonstrate their equipment. He would typically do this for HVAC, an energy management system, and fixtures, and should do it for the fire alarm system as well.

The Service Contract

After a fire alarm system is installed, the biggest drivers of cost are regular maintenance, annual testing, and system adds. To keep these expenses under control, the facility manager or building owner should determine what maintenance and testing work is covered by the service contract. He or she should also determine the cost of a clearly-defined service agreement before the system is installed.

It's almost impossible to get too specific when outlining the services to be included in a service agreement. Building owners should discuss the following items with the service provider, and getting their terms in writing:

1. The current hourly rate, as well as any premium for calls on nights, weekends and holidays
2. The length of time these rates will be in effect
3. Whether the provider imposes a minimum charge for a service call, and, if so, how much it is
4. The frequency with which labor rates increase
5. The amount and date of the last price increase
6. The average time to respond to an emergency
7. Whether the service provider offers a discount, if any, from the published price list for parts
8. The length of the warranty period
9. Whether the warranty covers both parts and labor, as well as annual testing
10. Whether system training is available to the end-user and how much it costs

Technology

When evaluating system technology, facility managers should keep in mind that any system from a reputable vendor should meet building codes. As a result, the purchase decision needs to consider other factors. One is the ability of the system to expand or adapt, if, for instance, an addition is affixed to the building, or the use of the building changes. Look for flexibility.

Facility managers also want to verify that they will be able to continue using the equipment in place, even when the vendor upgrades technology. The facility should be able to migrate over time to the new system, without compromising the operation of the existing system. Upgrading or replacing the system in stages, rather than all at once, can lessen the financial burden placed on building management, as well as reduce the interruption of day-to-day operations.

It also makes sense to ask how long the current technology has been in operation. If a particular system has been on the market, for instance, 10-12 years or more, it may be approaching the point at which it is a candidate for replacement; however, a facility manager shouldn't have to replace a system that's just a few years old, or worry that it won't be supported.

Similarly, facilities managers should ask the manufacturer to provide the published list prices for parts and make sure it is updated yearly. Verify that you're not being charged more than list price for any replacement parts. Don't be deterred if a provider says that it doesn't have published list prices, because they all do.

The facility manager may want to ask about the amount and type of system training the alarm vendor provides. The larger the building, the more important that a facility employee have some training on the system's operation. Similarly, if a facility is occupied around the clock, it is helpful to have an employee from each shift who understands the system.

Most fire alarm systems are proprietary in the sense that one vendor's detectors won't work with another vendor's control panel. However, a facility manager will want to look for a vendor that has several distributors in his or her area. That way, the facility manager will enjoy the advantage of having multiple options for parts and service.

Fortunately, in the future, facilities managers should find it easier to ensure that they are getting the best fire alarm systems for their facilities. That's because the systems are moving to a new category within the Master Format (Division 28) of the Construction Specification Institute. Instead of being a sub-contractor to the electrical subcontractor, fire alarm system manufacturers now will be at the same level as other trades, such as flooring, windows, HVAC, telephones, etc. That should make it easier for building owners and facility managers to gain direct access to information on the systems. Because they will be the ones owning the fire alarm system, or interacting with it on a regular basis, building owners and facility managers should select a system based on their specific needs and wants, rather than having an electrical contractor choose it for them. Doing so will provide them with the most value over the life of the fire alarm system.

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